

AMENDMENTS TO THE SPECIFICATION

(1) Please amend paragraph [0031] as follows:

[0031] FIGS. 15-18F and 21 are ~~perspective~~-views illustrating an eighth embodiment of a fastener having a ball shape for insertion into an opening of at least one of a picket or rail.

(2) Please amend paragraph [0055] as follows:

[0055] As shown in FIGS. 15, 15A and 15B, the fasteners 200A, 200B are a solid, or alternatively, hollow member having a ball shape. FIG 15 illustrates an isometric view of a spherical fastener 200A, while FIG. 15A illustrates a cross section view of the fastener 200A in FIG. 15 taken along Line 15A-15A. FIG. 15B illustrates a cross section view of a fastener 200B similar to the fastener 200A in FIG 15A, but where the opening 216B of the fastener 200B has been altered to include a cylindrical opening 216B having a countersink. FIGS. 15C and 15D illustrate alternative embodiments of the fasteners 200A and 200B in FIGS. 15A and 15B, respectively, but are illustrated as fasteners 200C and 200D manufactured from plastic. For simplicity, the following discussion references only fasteners 200A and 200B, but it is understood that the discussion respectively applies to fasteners 200C and 200D, notwithstanding construction materials. Both fasteners 200A, 200B respectively include a first portion 212A, 212B (i.e., a first engaging portion 212A, 212B) for engaging a picket (e.g., picket 44), and a second portion 214A, 214B (i.e., a mating portion 214A, 214B) for engaging a second article, such as a rail 48 to which the picket 44 is to be attached. For both fasteners 200A, 200B, a top surface 218A, 218B and an opposite bottom surface 220A, 220B are substantially flat, to facilitate ease of placement and assembly onto a facing surface of an item, e.g., a rail 48. The fasteners 200A, 200B are desirably fabricated as a single piece of a uniform material for ease of

fabrication. Exemplary materials include nylon, plastics, polyvinyl chloride, and other deformable materials including but not limited to synthetic rubber and polyurethane. The fasteners 200A, 200B preferably include a first set of ridges 211A, 211B, respectively, disposed on an exterior surface of the first portion 212A, 212B or first engaging portion 212A, 212B thereof, for use in frictionally engaging an interior surface of a cylindrical opening provided in a longitudinal end of a picket or baluster 44. The maximum dimensions of the ridges of the fasteners 200A, 200B are preferably selected to be slightly larger than the internal dimensions of the opening in the picket 44, e.g., by an amount on the order of hundredths of an inch along the diameter of the ridges, such that the ridges frictionally engage the interior surface of the opening in the picket 44 and stay engaged despite stresses that the assembled rail 48 and picket 44 may encounter later. In such case, the fasteners 200A, 200B and/or the ridges 211A, 211B are fabricated of a material and thickness such that some deformation of the ridges and/or the underlying ball occurs upon inserting the fasteners 200A, 200B into the opening of the picket 44. FIG. 21 illustrates a cross-sectional close-up view of fastener 200B shown in FIG. 15B employed in a connected assembly.

(3) Please amend paragraph [0057] as follows:

[0057] A stop 222A₁, 222A₂, 222B₁, 222B₂ ~~222A, 222B~~ may be provided on the exterior surface of the fasteners 200A, 200B in either or both the first portion 212A, 212B and second portion 214A, 214B, for use in stopping the fastener 200A, 200B from being inserted too deeply into one or the other of the picket and the rail to which it is being joined. As illustrated, the stop 222A₁, 222A₂, 222B₁, 222B₂ ~~222A, 222B~~ may simply be the ridges 211A, 211B, 213A, 213B of either or both the first and second portions 212A, 212B, 214A, 214B having the outermost diameters,

i.e., the ridges 211A, 211B, 213A, 213B having the largest diameters when compared to others of the ridges. As may be clearly seen from FIGURES 15, 15A and 15B, in some embodiments, these outermost ridges 222A₁, 222A₂, 222B₁, 222B₂ ~~222A, 222B~~ do not function strictly as a positive stop, but rather simply provide the maximum ridge diameter for either or both portions 212A, 212B, 214A, 214B of the fastener 200A, 200B to engage their respective items (e.g., a picket or a rail). While the fasteners 200A, 200B are desirably fabricated in one piece and of uniform material throughout, the first and second portions 212A, 212B, 214A, 214B, or other components of fasteners 200A, 200B may be constructed of different materials or different pieces of the same or similar materials and then assembled to make the fastener.

(4) Please amend paragraph [0058] as follows:

[0058] The fasteners 200A, 200B are preferably provided with an aperture 216A, 216B on at least one end thereof, the aperture optionally 216A, 216B ~~preferably~~ being sized and shaped to accommodate standard-sized tools such as those of rectangular cross-section (opening 216A in FIG. 200A), e.g. a rectangular nut driver or socket wrench, or those having other cross-sections, e.g. hexagonal drivers, also known as "Allen" wrenches, for example. In such case, the aperture 216A provides a way of applying torque to insert a lower portion 214A of the fastener 200A into an item such as a rail.

(5) Please amend paragraph [0059] as follows:

[0059] Alternatively, the aperture may be a countersink 216B, such as the countersink 216B shown in FIG. 15B, for retaining a screw or bolt (e.g., screw 224 shown in FIG. 21) of length

sufficient to pass through the fastener 200B from the side of the aperture 216B to the opposite side, the screw or bolt 224 then threadably engaging another item, e.g. the rail 48 thereunder.

(6) Please amend paragraph [0060] as follows:

[0060] Alternatively, to facilitate turning of the fastener, at least one end of the fasteners 200A, ~~200B~~ may be provided with a bolthead (such as that shown and described above relative to FIG. 12) in the place of aperture 216A, ~~216B~~, the bolthead being desirably formed integrally to a top surface 218A, ~~218B~~ of the ~~fasteners~~ fastener 200A, ~~200B~~. In such case, the bolthead provides a way of applying torque to insert a lower portion 214A, ~~214B~~ of the ~~fasteners~~ fastener 200A, ~~200B~~ into an item such as a rail.

(7) Please amend paragraph [0061] as follows:

[0061] In a preferred method of assembling a picket 44 to a rail 48 to form an element of a railing or balustrade, the ~~fasteners~~ fastener 200A, 200B is placed, bottom side 220A, 220B down on a rail 48, leaving the top surface 218A, 218B exposed. The body of a screw or bolt 224 is threadably inserted into or, alternatively, passed through the fasteners 200A, 200B to threadably engage the rail 48 below, while the screwhead, bolthead, or tool-receiving aperture 216A (or countersink 216B) of the fasteners 200A, 200B remains accessible from a top surface 218A, 218B to allow torque to be applied to affix the fastener 200A, 200B to the rail 48. Thereafter, a cooperating opening of the picket 44 is then inserted over the fasteners 200A, 200B to affix the picket 44 to the rail 48. The cooperating opening can have a variety of shapes, such as cylindrical, conical, rectangular, hexagonal or other regular polygon, as well as in the shape of a half-ball or section of a ball, as that term is defined herein.